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ABSTRACT

An analysis of discourse focuses on argumentative strategies used in reply to a complaint. The complaint was in the form of a letter, in English, written to a breakfast cereal company, expressing concern about a stone found in the product. The response, also in letter form, is examined for its text strategy. These elements are discussed: the letter's interactive framework using first- and second-person references, which signals involvement; increasing text complexity within the main body of the letter; expository text suggesting careful thought; use of text patterns signaling concession; a conclusion with a false suggestion of coherence; and patterns corresponding to rhetorical structure theory. It is noted that when the text was presented to 6 national speakers of English and 18 students of English as a Second Language, who were then asked to point out the portion they thought represented the essence of the text as a whole, the two groups selected different paragraphs. Contains 20 references. (MSE)

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Analyzing Argumentive Strategies: A Reply to a Complaint

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Analysing Argumentative Strategies: A Reply to a Complaint

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The focus of the present paper is on argumentative strategies in a reply to a complaint. This particular communicative situation has been chosen for analysis as it forms a challenge to the argumentative skills of the writer: S/he must succeed in winning the confidence of a dissatisfied customer by the quality of her/his reply. Textbooks in business communication generally recommend that a reply to a complaint should be apologetic but firm.

In this paper I shall analyse a piece of authentic discourse (see Appendix). The text is a reply to a complaint which I made a few years ago having found a small stone in my breakfast cereal. The writer of the reply, representing a company, may have started from a template text, which has been accommodated to fit the particular complaint. The sample text will be viewed as a product permitting us to make hypotheses about the processes underlying its surface, to reconstruct parts of the text producer's "text strategy" (Enkvist 1987). Finally, I shall only be concerned with the text itself and leave aside the "epistolary conventions" (Longacre 1992) though these have an important interpersonal function.[1]

To start with, the text consists of an interactive frame, in which the writer, representing the company and referred to as *we*, addresses the reader as *you*. This can be seen most clearly in the very simple first and last paragraphs but interactional segments are also visible in paragraphs two and four. The interactive text frames an embedded subtext, which reports the results of the allegedly careful thought given to the matter of complaint by the representatives of the company. This main body of the letter comprises paragraphs two, three, and four.

The interactive frame text thus manifests first and second person references, which signal "involvement" (Biber 1988; Chafe 1982). The text receiver, *you*, is often depicted in the semantic roles of 'affected' or 'recipient' (for semantic roles, see Quirk et al. 1985). Also, s/he is repeatedly mentioned in subordinate clauses. Further, when the role is 'agentive', the action has been nominalized,

[1] Epistolary conventions here include the letterhead, the very important legal phrase *without prejudice* at the outset of the letter, the address and the date, the conventional salutation and complimentary close, the written and printed signature, followed by an indication of the marital status of the writer and her position in the company.

as in *your recent complaint* (cf. Chafe 1982; Halliday 1985). Finally, many of the noun phrases in which the text receiver appears function as an object in a clause or sentence having the *we* of the company as the usually 'agentive' subject. In contrast, *we* is, expectedly, the active partner in this piece of discourse and the more frequently mentioned one. Moreover, *we* tends to appear together with another sign of involvement, i.e. "private verbs" (Quirk et al. 1985), which convey cognitive processes of the collective 'we' of the company (e.g. *we are sorry/conscious of; can think/assume*).

Interestingly, *we* appears as 'affected' in only one instance. After a discussion of two possible sources of the stone in paragraphs two and three, the reader's expectations guide the writer to compose a conclusion to the main body of the letter. Hence, at the outset of paragraph four the reader learns that *these precautions* — very carefully applied and normally effective — *have sadly let us down*. It can then only be *very upsetting to realise* that this has simply happened to *us*. Immediately after, however, *we* is again used in the 'agentive' role, politely taking the opportunity of assuring the reader what the company is really like.

The text thus has an involved focus, particularly in its interactive frame. But we also find the opposite. Indications of "integration" and "detachment" (Chafe 1982), or "informational production" (Biber 1988), include the passive, attributive adjectives, nominalizations, and participles (e.g. *the small particles falling clear during later sieving*). Many of these appear especially in the main body of the letter, to which we now turn our attention.

As compared to the surrounding frame text, the main body of the letter has longer paragraphs. They consist of increasingly complicated sentences, some of which contain several layers of embedding. There is, in fact, a striking difference between the simple interactive frame text in the very short first and last paragraphs, and the much more difficult informational text in the three mid-paragraphs. This part of the text opens in the second paragraph with a preposed adverbial clause, which functions as a marker of a textual boundary (see Virtanen 1992). The causal-temporal sequence of clauses in this sentence signals a shift from the interactive frame to an embedded expository text, the text type being established in the main clause. The only two possibilities referred to in this topic sentence are spelled out one after the other in paragraphs two and three, to be subsequently eliminated as far as possible, or at least shown to be exceptional. Paragraph four offers a climactic conclusion to the main body and this is where the interactive frame again gradually takes over, to lead to the final interactive paragraph five.

The main body of the text gets an objective flavour of 'careful thought' through the use of devices typical of the expository type of text (cf. Longacre 1983; Werlich 1976). Explicit signals of discourse organization, such as the enumerative chain of *only two possible sources — firstly — the second possibility*, help the reader follow the exposition of the results of the inquiry. The expository type of text is, however, often closely tied to argumentation. This type of text is inherently implicit, as shown by Östman (1987). In other words,

Östman (1987: 104) rightly points out that "the unmarked situation" in argumentative, or as he calls it, persuasive discourse is "an **avoidance** of markers — especially explicit markers — that might indicate that you are in the process of persuading somebody [sic]." In this letter, the expository part is interspersed with argumentative elements — the more so as the text proceeds. These include modal auxiliaries, evaluative adjectives and adverbials, and the amplifier *very*, which is the third most frequent single word in the entire text, after the expected *the*, *of*, and similar function words. Further, embedding weighty arguments in interactive main clauses is interesting in terms of truth values (cf. *we can reasonably assume that* in paragraph two, and *we would like to take the opportunity of assuring you that* in paragraph four). Yet another evaluative device is negation (see Labov 1972). Hence, in the final paragraph, *has not been undermined* activates the assumption that there has been or that there is confidence in the first place. Lastly, lexical choices in this text generally reflect a positive view, stressing the *very careful* processes of production and the high standards of quality, rather than keeping on referring to the unfortunate incident.

As pointed out above, paragraph four may be considered the peak of the main body of the letter, in terms of Longacre's (1983) claim that even non-narrative discourse may manifest tension. Furthermore, in line with Labov's (1972) and Fleischman's (1990) findings concerning narrative, this text too displays an increase of evaluative elements in the peak section (for a discussion of the peak, see also Wårvik, in this volume).

A typical text-structuring pattern in argumentative discourse is concession (cf. Werlich 1976). The second paragraph manifests a concessive pattern signalled through two explicit connecters, the conjunction *though* and the conjunct *however*. The *though*-clause gets end-weight in the sentence. At the same time, the fact that information is here packed in a syntactically subordinated form, iconically draws it back from the foreground of the normal, very careful, problem-free processes which were presented in the preceding main clause and represent given information at this point. Moreover, the generic *a very small stone* emphasizes its hypothetical nature and heavily limits its potential size (cf. also the modal *may*). End-position of this concessive clause allows the writer to elaborate on it in the following text. Thus, the first source is argued to be practically impossible in the subsequent *however*-headed sentence, which has been given end-weight in the paragraph.

Paragraph three presents the second possibility in a similar but shorter form, which encourages the text receiver to keep the now established concessive pattern active and to reapply it while processing the content of this paragraph. The activating signal here is *second*, followed by repetition of lexical material and syntactic structure (cf. esp. the paragraph-final non-finite clause, iconic in form of the concluding participle clause in the preceding paragraph). Explicit signals of concession are no more needed at this point, which is a desirable situation in persuasive discourse (cf. Östman 1987); the reader can now be relied on to keep the established pattern of argument active.

A close look at the text shows that it is somewhat less clear what *therefore* at the outset of the fourth paragraph exactly refers to. At this point, a conclusion is expected: There were two possibilities, both of which have been shown to be marginal. *Therefore* thus functions as a signal to the reader that the expectation will be met. As none of the convincing arguments, however, suffice to completely exclude the possibility that the complaint has some ground, the text producer falls back on the semantic role of the 'affected', as pointed out above.

Another interesting element in this paragraph is the conjunction *and* coordinating the first and the second part of the paragraph-long sentence (*and we would like to take the opportunity of...*). Here *but* would be much more risky; the absence of a connecter, again, would cut the flow of text and hence, make the reader aware of the discontinuity in the line of argument. This *and* can be given several different interpretations, all acceptable from the text producer's point of view. More importantly, its presence gives the intended impression of the text being coherent; to put it in Enkvist's (1978) terminology, this connecter creates "pseudo-coherence".

Paragraph four contains several levels of syntactic embedding, unfolding as the discourse proceeds. It ends with an implicit reproach which the responsibility-conscious text producer directs to the reader: The dissatisfied customer is, I believe it is intended, responsible for her/his own children, who should not, but apparently do eat unsupervised. This final effort to turn the situation to the company's advantage by freeing them from some responsibility gets end-weight in the climactic conclusion of the main body of the text. At the same time, the potential accusation is deeply embedded and hence syntactically backgrounded. Most importantly, it is implicit: As Östman (1987) points out, text producers cannot be held responsible for implicit statements.

The packaging of information is highly interesting in this text (for discussions of information dynamics, see e.g. Chafe 1994; Enkvist 1989; Firbas 1992; Halliday 1985; Prince 1981). While the positional term 'theme' sometimes refers to a fairly straightforward structural notion, what is 'given information' may be a controversial issue and one of the questions to be asked is **whose** given we are talking about. In this paper, information is considered given if the writer has chosen to present it as such, for instance, through position in the sentence, paragraph, or text. By doing this, the writer shows that s/he assumes the particular piece of information to be accessible to the reader, i.e. available because it has been activated recently enough through linguistic material or because the reader is assumed to be able to infer the particular piece of information from the situation or from her/his knowledge of the world. However, the writer's assumptions do not always tally with the text world and universe of discourse which the reader is constructing while processing the text. But it lies in the interest of the producer of **this** particular text to succeed in monitoring discourse processing, in order to attain the communicative goal of the letter.

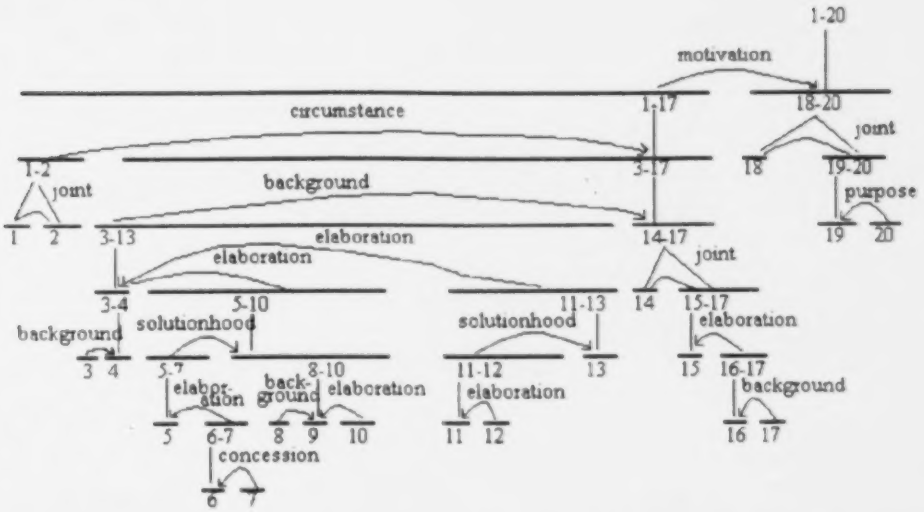
Let me illustrate this by taking a brief look at the two preposed adverbial clauses in the text. It was pointed out above that the clauses in the topic sentence at the outset of paragraph two are iconically ordered, to reflect the temporal-causal relationship of the events depicted in them. Secondly, the preposed adverbial clause was argued to function as a signal a textual boundary. More importantly for the argumentative purposes of the text, this ordering is also a smart way of presenting as given something you wish your reader to accept as given, i.e. 'we have given the matter very careful thought'. At the clausal level, end-weight falls on *very careful thought*, as certainly intended. The writer knows that she can assume appropriate inferencing here. At the same time, this arrangement serves the function of giving her a solid basis for what she is going to claim in the postposed main clause: No more than two possible sources can be identified.

Another similar instance, in paragraph two, is the preposed subclause *as the cooked wheat grain...*, conveying information which is professionally given to the writer but new to the reader. By preposing this piece of information, the writer defines it as a necessary background for what follows and hence signals to the reader to process this information and keep it active in anticipation of a more important continuation. This kind of arrangement serves to make the reader take the backgrounded information for granted, as something relatively given. Similarly, clause-initial placement of *as a major producer of breakfast cereals*, in paragraph four, realizes an argumentative goal by instructing the reader to process this piece of information as a fact which grants the writer the authority to present the subsequent arguments.

The final paragraph opens with an explicit statement of the communicative goal of the letter: *We hope your confidence in our product has not been undermined*. Further, a reimbursement — a culture-based expectation of the reader — is offered, to show regret and the sincerety of the wish to restore the confidence of the particular customer. It will be shown below that this paragraph is the dominant part of the entire text.

I shall devote the remainder of the paper to an analysis of the sample text in terms of *Rhetorical Structure Theory* (henceforth RST; see Mann, Matthiessen & Thompson 1992; cf. also Grimes 1975). As this model has been used to pinpoint the essence of a text, it will be of interest to compare the results with readers' ideas about the central portion of the sample letter. The following RST tree diagram represents my interpretation of the text. In this diagram the basic unit is the clause; however, as Mann et al. (1992: 51) recommend, clausal subjects and objects and restrictive relative clauses have not been separated as units of their own. The reader is referred to Mann et al. (1992) for details of the model. Interestingly, the diagram reflects paragraph structure to a large extent. Further, the topic sentence at the outset of paragraph two is singled out from the rest of that paragraph (3-4 in the diagram).

Figure 1. An RST analysis of the sample text (for details, see Mann et al. 1992).



We can 'prune' the tree to arrive at the essence of the text as a whole, the "comprehensive locus of effect", as indicated by Mann et al. (1992: 61-2). This part is further characterized as the locus of the effect which plausibly, i.e. as assumed by the analyst, the writer was attempting to produce on the reader. Thus, according to their instructions (pp. 61-2), "for each relation linking nucleus to satellite, if the relation is defined to have a locus of effect that is the nucleus only, remove the satellite". For example, the satellite *having given the matter very careful thought* (3) is linked by such a relation, entitled 'background', to the nucleus *we can think of only two possible sources...*(4), and it will thus be removed by the procedure.[2] The resulting portion of text "remains coherent and represents a kind of ideational essence of the larger text" (Mann et al. 1992: 62). In this text, the comprehensive locus of effect turns out to be the final paragraph (18-20), which indeed explicitly states the communicative goal of the letter, that of trying to win over the dissatisfied customer, and then goes on to make an offer to compensate for the disappointment.

To compare this finding with readers' impressions of the essence of the text, a small-scale test was conducted using two groups of subjects. The text was

[2] In contrast, nothing will be removed from relations which are defined to have a locus of effect on both the nucleus and the satellite, as for instance, the 'elaboration' and the 'concession' relations. Hence, we keep both the nucleus *firstly it may have been picked up during harvesting of the wheat* (5) and the satellite *this is very carefully washed...* (6-7), as these are linked by the 'elaboration' relation (cf. also the 'concessive' relation in this latter sentence: 6-7).

presented to six native speakers, all of whom are language professionals, and to a group of second-year students at the English Department of Åbo Akademi. The subjects were asked to read the letter and indicate which portion of the text they thought represented the essence of the text as a whole.[3]

What this small-scale test shows is the fact that even a fairly straightforward text such as the sample letter will be interpreted differently by different people. Four out of the six native speakers, however, singled out the last paragraph of the text as the most important one, which would seem to coincide with the above analysis. The majority of the eighteen EFL students, again, regarded either the entire paragraph four or its central part (i.e. *we do maintain very high standards of quality*) as the essence of the text. The next most frequently chosen candidate was paragraph five, especially its first part. Finally, the responses of both groups exhibit variation indicating that readers show preference for different profiles of discourse organization. Hence, some of the readers might be argued to go for prominence in terms of nucleus relations, as manifested in an RST analysis; others, again, appear to primarily separate the frame text from its subtext; still others seem to indicate centrality in terms of lexical ties, the peak of the main body of the letter, or topicality at the level of a major chunk of text or the whole text. This suggests that we need multiple analyses of a text to get at its overall organization: Different analyses provide us with different perspectives on the same text. Thus, we need a number of models, even if these overlap to an extent, to gradually understand the complex organization underlying a textual surface.

Acknowledgements

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[3] I explained briefly the communicative situation in which the letter had been written. The essence of the text was further characterized as the central portion of the text, or its most important portion. The portion of text which the subjects were asked to single out could be of any size and even discontinuous, i.e. consist of several different parts of the text. The test was not timed.

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Appendix

The Sample Text

Dear Sir/Madam,

We write with respect to your recent complaint and are very sorry to learn of your dissatisfaction.

Having given the matter very careful thought we can think of only two possible sources of the stone that you found. Firstly it may have been picked up during harvesting of the wheat. This is very carefully washed and screened prior to use though a very small stone may evade this process. However, as the cooked wheat grain is flaked by being crushed between a pair of heavy rollers, we can reasonably assume that a stone would also be crushed, the small particles falling clear during later sieving.

The second possibility is the vine fruit, this is again very carefully washed and screened prior to use and again during blending with the other ingredients, the process normally effectively removing all extraneous material.

It is therefore very upsetting to realise these precautions have sadly let us down and we would like to take the opportunity of assuring you that as a major producer of breakfast cereals we do maintain very high standards of quality and are particularly conscious of our responsibilities, bearing in mind that our products are popular with children, who often eat unsupervised.

We hope your confidence in our product has not been undermined and that you will accept the enclosed reimbursement in order to replace your disappointing purchase.

Yours sincerely,